



Discussion Guide: “The Problem with Everything” by Meghan Daum

Heterodox Academy invites students, professors, and other heterodox enthusiasts to adopt or adapt these discussion questions as warranted by their interests and circumstances. Our one request: within an environment of open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual humility, please encourage disagreement and ensure everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

Thank you to the Heterodox Academy members who participated in our Virtual Book Club about this book. Questions and ideas that surfaced in that discussion served as the basis for this discussion guide.

Citation: Daum, Meghan. (2020) *The Problem with Everything: My Journey Through the New Culture Wars*. Gallery Books.

About the Book

From the publisher: “In the fall of 2016, acclaimed author Meghan Daum began working on a book about the excesses of contemporary feminism. With Hillary Clinton soon to be elected, she figured even the most fiercely liberal of her friends and readers could take the criticisms in stride. But after the election, she knew she needed to do more, and her nearly completed manuscript went in the trash. What came out in its place is the most sharply-observed, all-encompassing, and unputdownable book of her career.

“In this gripping new work, Meghan examines our country’s most intractable problems with clear-eyed honesty instead of exaggerated outrage. With passion, humor, and most importantly nuance, she tries to make sense of the current landscape—from Donald Trump’s presidency to the #MeToo movement and beyond. In the process, she wades into the waters of identity politics and intersectionality, thinks deeply about the gender wage gap, and tests a theory about the divide between Gen Xers and millennials.”

Discussion Questions

1

Throughout the book, Daum touches on generational differences. In the first chapter, she writes that when she was younger, she “had the great gift of being able to look up to my elders because it was possible to be like them.” Now, she sees that “young people don’t want to be us because they’re not even the same species as us” (p. 25). Do you agree with Daum that “the world has changed so much” that the youth of today “might as well belong to a different geological epoch?” What role might the rise of technology and social media have played in creating the generational divide, if, in fact, one exists? Is this divide different from what older generations typically feel when encountering younger ones?

2

After discussing the moral panics surrounding parenting in the 1980s, Daum writes, “I’m troubled by the ways in which contemporary feminism has turned womanhood into another kind of childhood, one inculcated with the same kind of fear and paranoia that haunted the children of the 1980s” (p. 47). What is your reaction to Daum’s claim that womanhood has been turned into another kind of childhood? What role does the media play? Do you agree with Daum that the media is, in large part, to blame by making “every fourth story a jeremiad about the ways in which women are screwed?”

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3

Daum is a fan of "respectability politics" and believes that women can make their point "in a way that is concise and clever but doesn't compromise our dignity" (p. 55). At what point, if ever, is it morally wrong to engage in respectable discourse? When, if ever, does outrage serve a valuable purpose?

4

Daum struggles to understand "what women stand to gain by reinforcing a narrative that they are a persecuted group" (p. 51). She later echoes George Will's conclusion of "victimhood as a 'coveted status that confers privileges'" (p. 130). Does this claim ring true? If yes, what are the implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on campus and beyond (e.g., in the workplace, in journalism)?

5

Daum's Gen X identity seems central to her understanding of self. She writes (p. 98): "Our identities weren't built around indifference. They were built around toughness. Or at least the simulation of toughness." Yet, she is critical of the "badassness" among the younger generation. What does Daum see as the difference between toughness and "badassness," and how does that distinction figure into her comfort with one mode of being vs. the other?

6

A point hinted at throughout the book is that in today's world, only women can get away with criticizing feminism. Do you agree that this is the case? Can we only criticize a group if we are a part of it? If yes, what might be the cultural and societal implications of "only from within" criticism? What historical issues and movements, if any, benefitted from outsider critique? Is this consistent with your observations of your campus' culture?

7

In her overview of the "Dear Colleague" letter (p. 135–137), Daum lays out the recent history of sexual assault allegations on campuses and takes issue with the way they have been handled. How do you view the "Dear Colleague" letter? Was it an overcorrection that withheld due process? Was it a necessary step towards protecting students? Have you experienced anything on campus that sways your opinion one way or the other?

8

Daum observes that at some point around 2014, "the framework for actual thinking mutated into a framework for the shorthand thinking of virtue signaling...there was no need to sort out facts or wrestle with contradictions when just using certain buzzwords – patriarchy, white supremacy, gaslighting – would grant automatic entry into a group of ostensibly like-minded peers" (p. 169). In essence, "if you called for nuance, you were part of the problem" (p. 170). Do you agree with Daum's assertion that this is a prevalent mode of belief or engagement? If yes, why do you think this mode became so widespread? What was so satisfying about it? With the gift of hindsight, how did this mode of engagement play out on campuses and around the country? How has the situation shifted, both on and off campuses, in the time since Daum wrote the book?

9

Daum reaches the conclusion that "you can't fight tribalism within a tribe" (p. 195). Is this true? What kind of tribe, if any, could fight tribalism? If none, is the fight against tribalism doomed or could it be fought differently? How?

10

During her time teaching undergraduate students, Daum mentioned that she was "determined to make [her] students uncomfortable" and created a course that "emphasized intellectual risk-taking, controversial opinion, and even ribald humor" (p. 203). Walking this line is difficult to do. How can professors encourage students to think in new ways and challenge their opinions in a world where no one seems to be given the benefit of the doubt and where the consequences for saying or doing the wrong thing are real?

11

What is the book's thesis? What does Daum see as the problem with everything? Do you agree? Why or why not?